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Presentation
FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Teaching Vocabulary to English Learners
April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners
Practice: Teach Vocabulary

Highlights

- Vocabulary plays a crucial role in learning to read
- ELs need to learn both common, everyday words and academic words
- Description of suggested vocabulary instruction strategies
- Considerations in strengthening your school's vocabulary program

Full Transcript

Slide #1

Teaching Vocabulary to English Learners

Slide #2

Here are a few tips before we get started...

Use the slide titles in the "outline" to jump to a specific section.

Click on the "script" tab to follow along with the narration.

Use the controls at the bottom to easily stop and start the presentation.

Download any related files in the "attachments" folder.

And show or hide the navigation using the windows icon.

Slide #3

This is Jennifer, a typical first-grader.

Jennifer grew up speaking English at home, which helped her learn thousands of words by the time she entered first grade.

Slide #4

Knowing so many words not only helped Jennifer communicate with her fellow students, it also helped her learn to read.

Slide #5

This is Mary. She's also a bright student. Like Jennifer, Mary was born in the U.S., but she never spoke English at home.

Slide #6

When Mary entered kindergarten, she knew very few words in English. This made learning to read a very big challenge.

Slide #7

Knowledge of words—of vocabulary—plays a crucial part in reading. Beginning readers use the words they already know to make sense of words they see in print.

Slide #8

If they don't know many words, they can't understand what they are reading; and if they can't read… they will never succeed in school.

This is why teaching vocabulary to students is essential.

Slide #9

To develop a strong vocabulary, students like Mary need special, focused instruction—not just a lesson here and there or word lists. They need to learn words in a meaningful context and through repeated exposure and practice. This is the only way they will remember them.

Slide #10

Experts suggest vocabulary is acquired in two ways, through natural acquisition and formal instruction.

Slide #11

Natural acquisition is the loosely structured, casual, and comfortable way for students to learn new words. This occurs while playing with friends, doing classroom activities, and talking with other native English speakers—anywhere students can comprehend words in a familiar context and have repeated opportunities to use those words.

Slide #12

Conversely, formal instruction is an explicit, direct, and intentional method of teaching words. This takes place in teacher-led lessons, textbooks, and classroom activities.

Slide #13

For students to successfully read, write, speak, and understand in school, they must learn vocabulary through BOTH formal instruction AND natural acquisition. And English learners need to learn MANY words, both the common words that native speakers know when they begin school and academic words used in school.

Slide #14

Let's start with some ways that teachers can set the stage for students to practice common vocabulary in their classrooms:

Slide #15

First, establish a comfortable and welcoming classroom atmosphere. Language is learned more easily when a student feels relaxed. Create a comfort zone by establishing a respectful, friendly environment for students to ask questions and practice words. This includes setting up a regular schedule and establishing rules during lessons to ensure students who do not yet have a firm grasp on English can predict what is going to happen and follow along more easily.

Slide #16

Second, use active learning techniques. This means asking questions, involving students, and solving problems together. Relying too much on individual work limits the opportunities for oral practice, which is essential to learning not just common words, but ALL vocabulary. Working in groups or pairs, doing hands-on lessons – these activities give students broad access to learn and use vocabulary.

Slide #17

Third, point out meanings of common words and phrases during teacher-directed instruction. Many teachers assume that students know simple common words like "tree" or "pencil." The fact is, many English learners may not have this knowledge, and some might be reluctant to ask questions. Teachers should use quick visual examples when discussing lessons, quickly pointing to an object or a picture when they introduce a word. They can also illustrate the meaning of a word with a gesture —shivering to show "its cold"—or using facial expressions to show emotions. Visuals and gestures are a quick and very effective way to draw attention to meanings of common words and ensure that every student understands what you are talking about.

Slide #18

And keep in mind... Just because a student sounds fluent in English, doesn't mean he really is. Though many English learners easily acquire English pronunciation and conversational phrases, these students may not understand common and academic vocabulary. When in doubt, it's better to over-teach students than to assume they understand.

Slide #19

Ok, so we've discussed common words. Now let's look at some ways to teach academic vocabulary.

Slide #20

There are two kinds of academic vocabulary:
general academic words and content-specific words.

General academic words are more formal than common words, which means they are used less in conversation. For example, "finish up" is a common phrase, while "conclude" is a similar, more formal word used in an academic context. Words that describe connections between concepts—like "however" and "therefore"—are also general academic words.

Slide #21

Imagine how difficult it would be to understand the main point of a history textbook if the meaning of "however" or "therefore" wasn't clear. Or write a paragraph? Or conduct a debate? Teachers should select specific academic words to focus on, and then practice and reinforce them across all content areas.

Slide #22

Content-specific words are specific to content areas of literature, mathematics, science, technology, and social studies.

Not too long ago, you'd probably never heard of words like "WiFi," "blog," or "megapixel." These are all content-specific words related to technology. When you are introduced to new tech vocabulary, chances are you aren't just reading them. They are usually introduced when someone is guiding you through a specific task.

Slide #23

Students—especially English learners—need this same kind of instruction. They need to experience vocabulary—especially content-specific words—in a meaningful context through explicit instruction. They need to learn action words and adverbs while doing, and learn nouns and adjectives while referencing objects and pictures. This not only helps them understand the words better, but they will also retain and use them more often.

Slide #24

So what can teachers do right now to improve vocabulary instruction for English learners?

First, work with colleagues to create a list of Essential Vocabulary—one that is organized by grade and content area. Don't make the list too short or too long. Some experts recommend 2 to 3 words per day or 8 to10 words per week for the early elementary grades. Gauge the needs of the class and challenge students without overwhelming them. The key is to provide lots of repetition, multiple opportunities for practice, and use words in a meaningful context.

Slide #25

Second, teach specific Aspects of Word Knowledge. Focus on pronunciation, spelling, and cross-language relationships of words. Review word roots, prefixes, and suffixes, and word families that show parts of speech. Pay special attention to words with multiple meanings.

Slide #26

A VERY important facet of word knowledge to address—especially for English learners—is cognates and false cognates. Cognates are word pairs that are related in sound in different languages—they alert students to word meanings that they already know or can easily figure out. For example, "Vocabulary" in English and "vocabulario" in Spanish sound alike and mean the same thing.

Slide #27

Cognates that sound the same but have alternate meanings are called false cognates. Teaching students about false cognates help sharpen precision with the words they are likely to make mistakes with.

Slide #28

Third, use "Student-Friendly" Definitions and Student Word Lists. Student-friendly definitions enable students to learn words in a meaningful context. For example, a teacher might explain the word "authority" as "the person who is in charge"—like the teacher in the classroom or the principal of the school. This may not be the dictionary definition, but it will probably connect with most children's experiences. The word can then be practiced and reinforced in other contexts to help the student learn the more precise meaning.

Slide #29

Also, encourage students to create their own vocabulary lists. This empowers them to increase their vocabulary on their own and become active in identifying unfamiliar words. Strategies like this are critical for reading comprehension.

Slide #30

Lastly, provide Quick Translations. Having a bilingual peer or adult provide a translation of a new word or phrase is a quick way of clarifying meaning. However, this is ONLY helpful if the person translating knows both the concept and the correct word in the native language. For example, it is unlikely that a bilingual student educated in an English language program would be able to translate the word "parallelogram" for another student. In this case, the language teacher needs to be the one introducing both the concept and the English vocabulary.

Slide #31

So where should you begin? Here are a few things to consider as you prepare to strengthen vocabulary instruction at your school.

Slide #32

Does your school or district already have a framework for vocabulary instruction in place? Does it need revision?

A vocabulary framework—lists of words to be mastered at each grade level—is a basic tool that might be created by grade level groups. Many people think that vocabulary lists from the core reading program will suffice. But be careful, core reading programs rarely contain sufficient information to address the needs of English learners because they are often designed for decoding purposes rather than critical meaning.

The district's vocabulary framework should include key words that reflect state content standards. It may even be helpful to look at released items from the state test to see what common and academic words are frequently used in test questions. Customizing your vocabulary framework to state standards will help build an instructional program that meets proficiency targets in state accountability systems.

Slide #33

Does your school or district provide professional development to teachers responsible for vocabulary instruction?

To take the vocabulary framework into classroom practice—and actually change instruction—teachers need classroom focused professional development. Coaching and teacher study groups are two professional development methods for districts and schools to consider.

Slide #34

Does your school support teacher collaboration in implementing the vocabulary framework?

The framework guides the vocabulary instruction of reading teachers, content area teachers, and ESL teachers. So they need to have collaborative time together to plan instruction, share results, and discuss the needs of individual students.

For example, ESL and content-area teachers could develop a weekly word list together. ESL teachers could pre-teach the words before they come up in content-area instruction or reinforce and extend word knowledge. This means students learn these words twice in different contexts, getting more exposure to the words results in a firmer grasp of the vocabulary—and this is just as true for common words as it is for academic words.

Slide #35

Remember, a strong vocabulary is essential to success in school. No student - native speaker of English or English language learner—will be able to reach high state standards without it.

To learn more about successful strategies for teaching vocabulary to English learners and access tools to use at your location, please explore the resources on this website.